

“Let me but give her an education”:

Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and the Monstrous, Motherless Daughter

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

April 2013

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2013

Abstract

The works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley have long been analyzed and dissected from a literary point of view. Close readings of their novels, however, provide an important picture within the context of history into the lives of two women, whose feminist ideas were very ahead of their time. Lesser-known works such as Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and Shelley's *Mathilda* (1819) exhibit some of these ideas, particularly the harmful effects of living through escapism (a habit criticized by Wollstonecraft) and of daughters growing up without their mothers. Both works criticize patriarchal society, blatantly in *The Wrongs of Woman* and subtly in *Mathilda*, by undermining conventional purpose of the novel, which in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was typically considered a "silly genre" written largely for women, a genre that would never challenge them intellectually. Both Wollstonecraft and Shelley intended revolutionize this genre with these two novels; unfortunately, circumstance prevented them from doing so. By closely reading these two novels and taking into consideration the lives of Wollstonecraft and Shelley, I analyze the historical importance of their mother-daughter relationship, a relationship that was clearly very strong even though Wollstonecraft died ten days after Shelley's birth.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Abel Alves for advising me during this project. His input and flexibility as I overcame certain roadblocks while writing this paper meant more to me than I can say, and his encouragement during my last two years as an undergraduate will always remain one of the highlights of my college career.

I would also like to thank my mother, Alys Caviness-Gober, for editing this paper, and for always being there when I needed her the most.

In reading any of Mary Shelley's novels, it is impossible to not to see in her words the ghost of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. It is as though one can glimpse in Shelley's writing the lens through which she gazed, searching for clues in Wollstonecraft's writings that would give Shelley the impossible: knowing her mother. Wollstonecraft died when Shelley was only ten days old. The forceful influence of the mother existed in spite of Wollstonecraft's death; as mother and author, she may have had even more of an effect upon her daughter's writing than Shelley's father, William Godwin, or husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley. This effect can be delineated by examining Shelley's *Mathilda* and Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*; both contain autobiographical elements, and both asserted feminist perspectives that were, at the time, rare in the novel genre. Shelley's *Mathilda* offered a subtler feminist message than did Wollstonecraft's in-your-face *The Wrongs of Woman*, yet both authors clearly possessed a passionate intent to illustrate feminist issues.

To understand these two stories and the impact mother had upon daughter, one must first see Mary Wollstonecraft through the only lens Mary Shelley had available: the facts of Wollstonecraft's life, and her writings. Wollstonecraft was born into an unhappy home on April 27, 1759; she was the eldest daughter of a former master-weaver, who was "frustrated in his attempts to become a gentleman-farmer," frustrations that he then turned back around on his family.¹ The tyrannical nature of Wollstonecraft's father, from the drunken abuse he piled upon his wife (and that Mary attempted to fend off) to the blatant favoritism that he showed towards his oldest son, simultaneously oppressed and

¹ Moira Ferguson, "Introduction," *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), 7.

inspired Mary, laying the foundations for the ideas that would later make her infamous.² She left home after the death of her mother and tried her hand at veritably all the limited careers afforded to single women at the time: chaperone, seamstress, nurse, teacher, and governess, all the while supporting her three sisters.³ Among these sisters was Eliza, who suffered a debilitating case of post-partum depression. In order to save her sister, Mary encouraged Eliza to leave her husband and baby; she made all the arrangements for Eliza to flee in 1784.⁴ This flouting of societal institutions was the beginning of Mary's infamy. Society never forgave Mary, who knew herself that she would be "the shameful incendiary in this shocking affair of a woman's leaving her bed-fellow."⁵ During this period of her life, Wollstonecraft also opened a day school in Newington Green with her sisters and good friend Fanny Blood, and for a time it was successful enough to support them. Blood's death in 1785 led to the closing of the school, but Wollstonecraft's unorthodox career was far from over.⁶ It was then that she began to write.

When Mary Wollstonecraft moved her school to Newington Green in 1784, she was drawn to the Rational Dissenters of the Newington Green Unitarian Church (NGUC): many of the sermons at NGUC stoked the political fires within her, solidifying her feminist philosophy.⁷ Newington Green made its mark on Mary, and through its founding work of feminist philosophy, on the world. Wollstonecraft was inspired by her intellectual circle at Newington Green, and she finally found the independence she craved

² Ferguson, "Introduction," 7.

³ Ibid, 8.

⁴ Emily Sunstein, *A Different Face: the Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1975), 85.

⁵ Ferguson, "Introduction," 8.

⁶ Sunstein, *A Different Face*, 92.

⁷ Lyndall Gordon, *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, (Great Britain: Virago Press, 2005), 40.

through writing, whether it was treatises such as *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787) or novels like *Mary: A Fiction* (1788).⁸ However, it was her revolutionary *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and shocking *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) that garnered her public notoriety and censure that would characterize her reputation long after her death. Her *Vindications* challenged “with impunity sacred and cherished tenets of eighteenth-century society,” in absolutely no uncertain terms.⁹ Her beliefs concerning the education of women (or lack thereof) and the inherently oppressive nature of marriage, saying her sex was “in silken fetters,” were unprecedented at the time and remained so for almost a century, until the women’s suffrage movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰ At the time, her writings horrified a public that was far from ready for her radical ideas.

Nor, indeed, did the public approve of her private life. She wrote her *Vindications* while she was living in France during the turmoil of the French Revolution, here she met and engaged in a passionate love affair with an American adventurer, Gilbert Imlay.¹¹ The affair resulted in the birth of an illegitimate daughter, Fanny, in 1794, and even though her relationship with Imlay began to deteriorate soon thereafter and they never married, Wollstonecraft boldly continued to call to herself “Mrs Imlay.”¹² This relationship undoubtedly affected Wollstonecraft’s feelings about social institutions in the context of female sexuality and motherhood. Had Imlay not abandoned

⁸ Ferguson, “Introduction,” 8-9.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sunstein, *A Different Face*, 238.

¹² Ibid., 256-7.

Wollstonecraft in 1795, Fanny's birth might have succeeded in domesticating her; instead, the situation fostered one suicide attempt, her return to England, and then another suicide attempt, which only failed because a passer-by saw Wollstonecraft throwing herself into the Thames.¹³

She found solace in writing again, joining an intellectual circle that included English journalist, political philosopher, and novelist William Godwin, whose friendship gradually turned to love.¹⁴ Godwin was also a political and social radical; he was both a utilitarian and an anarchist. After discovering Wollstonecraft was pregnant, they married on March 29, 1797, in order to ensure the legitimacy of their child and in spite of their mutually critical views on the institution of marriage.¹⁵ Moira Ferguson, author of the introduction to the 1975 reprinting of *The Wrongs of Woman*, attributes the willingness to marry, on Wollstonecraft's part, to her unhappy childhood, which was "quite deeply deprived of affection and caused her to place a high priority on love and security."¹⁶ Still, the Godwin-Wollstonecraft marriage was a happy one, if rather unconventional. Their happiness ended abruptly a short five months later due to circumstances beyond their control. Mary Wollstonecraft gave birth to their daughter Mary on August 30, 1797, but Wollstonecraft died ten days later of complications on September 10.¹⁷ The loss devastated Godwin, who believed "there [did] not exist her equal in the world" and that they "were formed to make each other happy."¹⁸ This loss was equally devastating to her

¹³ Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), 245.

¹⁴ Ferguson, "Introduction," 11.

¹⁵ Sunstein, *A Different Face*, 335.

¹⁶ Ferguson, "Introduction," 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ Wardle, *A Critical Biography*, 261.

infant daughter, though it would only become apparent years later in her own writings, after Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin became better known as Mary Shelley.

At the time of her death, Mary Wollstonecraft was in the process of writing a novel, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798). Godwin himself edited the original manuscript and posthumously published *The Wrongs of Woman* along with several other unfinished works, which makes for an interesting parallel to Mary Shelley's own literary pursuits as her husband's editor after his untimely death in a boating accident in 1822.¹⁹ Eclipsed by the infamy of her *Vindications*—and to a lesser extent, Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1798), which revealed with shocking honesty the “dirty secrets” of Wollstonecraft's life, including her illegitimate daughter and her suicide attempts—*The Wrongs of Woman* is generally referenced in scholarship as a mere footnote, a final oddity in a long list of oddities.²⁰ More often than not, it is only mentioned as one of the many novels Mary Shelley read and reread between 1814 and 1817 while she was composing *Frankenstein* (1818).²¹ *The Wrongs of Woman* is not counted among Mary Wollstonecraft's major works, but its influence over her daughter and the potential impact it *could* have had on society should not be discounted, either.

Perhaps one of the most notable qualities of *The Wrongs of Woman* is that it is, in fact, a novel. In Wollstonecraft's lifetime, the novel as a genre was only about fifty years old, yet in her view, these sensationalized fictions were already doing irreparable damage to women by reinforcing their ignorance and lack of education, therefore keeping them

¹⁹ Ferguson, “Introduction” in *The Wrongs of Woman*, 12.

²⁰ Sunstein, *A Different Face*, 349.

²¹ Katherine Hill-Miller, “My Hideous Progeny:” Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 68.

firmly and inescapably in the home.²² Wollstonecraft's concern over romance novels stemmed from the fact that female characters were written specifically to maintain "the feminine values of attractiveness to men and sexual virtue [as heroines] while offering women the limited but devious power over men [as villains]."²³ If a woman was written as a heroine attempting to attain autonomy, she could only do so "at the cost of endangering her propriety by daring to cross gender lines," thus implying in novels "a politics of gender in confronting women readers with two starkly opposed roles, neither one satisfactory."²⁴ As an author and as a woman, the two female literary standards were endlessly frustrating to Wollstonecraft, as Jeanne Moskal explains:

The problem, for Wollstonecraft, was that women [interpolated] as heroines become blind to other models for their own behavior: "Women who are amused by the reveries of stupid novelists," writes Wollstonecraft, do so partly because, being "denied all political privileges... their attention [is] naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts," thus reinforcing the *status quo*. Since women readers this poorly educated cannot comprehend the general good, they are "confined to trifling employments," and "shamefully... neglect the duties of life." ... What concerns Wollstonecraft is the enforced passivity of "the subject in (and of) ideology" who seems to have herself freely chosen her limited lot in life.²⁵

This problem of "enforced passivity" perpetuated by women "freely" going along with the *status quo* is one of the many topics Wollstonecraft condemns in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and like much of the treatise, it is a topic that is still highly relevant today. It seems rather paradoxical that, in such a limited literary and social environment, Wollstonecraft would write a novel of her own, until one realizes that *The Wrongs of*

²² Ferguson, "Introduction" in *The Wrongs of Woman*, 11.

²³ Jeanne Moskal, "'To speak in Sanchean phrase': Cervantes and the Politics of Mary Shelley's *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*," *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 28.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 28-9

Woman was no mere creative endeavor. With it, she attempted to subvert the literary trends of the day and infuse her ideas concerning female oppression “into a popular and ordinarily ‘silly’ genre,” an attempt that might have been successful had she lived long enough to finish it.²⁶

As with many of the works written by the members of Godwin and Wollstonecraft’s intellectual coterie, *The Wrongs of Woman* was intended to be part of a larger discourse that included “anything from novels to argumentative and analytical discourse of historic and conventional kinds” meant to eventually lead to “a revolution in individual consciousness, achieved by vanguard intellectuals such as themselves.”²⁷ To accomplish their “revolution through literature,” members of the Godwin circle planned and published works in a purposefully wide range of forms, genres, and styles, though the foremost of these was, indeed, the novel.²⁸ As the most widely read form of print besides newspapers and magazines among the middle-class, novels were best suited to “disseminate their ideas” to the public, which was something Wollstonecraft took seriously into consideration while writing and planning *The Wrongs of Woman*.²⁹ No doubt few women read the *Vindications* that she had written on their behalf, but a novel could, in theory, expose a multitude of women (and men) to “the ideas she had been developing and refining throughout her career as a writer.”³⁰ In a way, such a novel was the obvious next step for her, and potentially a brilliant one.

²⁶ Ferguson, “Introduction,” 12.

²⁷ Gary Kelly, “Politicizing the Personal: Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and the Coterie Novel,” *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 150.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 153.

³⁰ Ferguson, “Introduction,” 12.

To accomplish her purpose, Wollstonecraft poured everything she had into the manuscript for *The Wrongs of Woman*. She started by creating truly unforgettable characters and a dramatic but believable story that included several autobiographical elements. The plot follows the eponymous character, Maria, after her loathsome husband locks her away in an insane asylum, her only crime having been leaving her husband to save her unborn daughter, to whom she gives birth while she is on the run.³¹ This story line parallels Wollstonecraft's sister Eliza's unfortunate circumstances; thankfully, however, Eliza was never committed to an asylum. In the asylum, Maria agonizes over the fate of her child and laments that the child is a daughter, anticipating "the aggravated ills of life that her sex rendered almost inevitable, even while dreading she was no more."³² Maria's worries mirror Wollstonecraft's anxiety about and passionate interest in the female condition in her society, not to mention her own feelings about motherhood. To soothe herself, Maria writes her memoirs and addresses them to her daughter; however, Wollstonecraft frames the memoirs within the text so that the reader is not exposed to Maria's full story until after she learns that her daughter is dead.³³

While in the asylum, Maria meets the other two central figures of the novel: Danford and Jemimia. Darnford is a fellow inmate of the asylum with whom Maria falls in love and later "receive[s]" as her husband, in spite of the fact that she is still legally married to the man who imprisoned her, a relationship that calls to mind Wollstonecraft's own affair with Imlay, the father of her illegitimate daughter.³⁴ The second central

³¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, or The Wrongs of Woman*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), 130.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³ Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, 73.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

figure, Jemima, is a prison guard, who Wollstonecraft later discloses has endured more insufferable hardships in her life than possibly any female character in fiction prior to *The Wrongs of Woman*. The narration of Jemima's painfully unpleasant life occupies the longest chapter in the novel, showing that she serves largely as a universal character—a character who suffers not only because she is born a female, but also because she is born extremely poor.³⁵ Jemima's life story serves to illustrate the horrors and limitations of being a female, from childhood to adulthood. In Jemima, Wollstonecraft explores the idea that the circumstances of being born female and poor necessarily *create* a victimized and disempowered womanhood. Feminine sexuality is at the heart of much of Jemima's suffering, through both motherhood and sexual victimization. Jemima is a motherless bastard, abused and denied affection as a child, raped multiple times by her master when she becomes a servant at age sixteen, forced to have an abortion after he impregnates her, forced into prostitution after her master's wife discovers him raping her, arrested for theft, and prevented from undertaking any respectable job until finally she acquires the guard position at the asylum, where she eventually relates her life story to Maria.³⁶

Maria and Jemima become sympathetic to each other by virtue of their common experiences as women oppressed, which is abundantly clear through the language Wollstonecraft uses. For example, early in the novel, Maria thinks to herself, "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?"³⁷ Jemima later tells Maria, "I was, in fact, born a slave, and chained by infamy to slavery during the whole of existence, without having any companions to alleviate it by sympathy, or to teach me how to rise

³⁵ Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 52-69.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

above it by their own example.”³⁸ By the end of the unfinished novel, society has rejected both women as “monstrous outcast[s]”—not through any fault of their own, but because society itself made them so.³⁹ Wollstonecraft’s message to the women of her era is clear: unless women actively change their lot in life, unless women *demand* the same privileges and rights that men just assume and claim with impunity, then merely being born a female will continue to be a life sentence of slavery and victimization, and women will forever remain subject to and at the mercy of the whims of men. This radical message completely subverted the “silly genre” novels of the day.

Along with being a radical re-imagining of the novel genre, *The Wrongs of Woman* is predominantly a novel about motherhood, and the harmful effects of a daughter growing up without a mother to guide her and educate her. Maria’s mother is largely absent from the family before her death, thanks to the cruel, overbearing nature of her husband; Jemima’s mother dies in childbirth; even Maria’s daughter dies because she is separated from her mother. Motherlessness is a quality Wollstonecraft uses intentionally to characterize her women and show the wrongs done *to* them that, in effect, force them to become so “monstrous.”⁴⁰ She also characterizes her heroines as monstrous simply because they are motherless.⁴¹ Maria is monstrous: her placement in an asylum means she is a social outcast, “unfit” for normal society; she commits adultery and attempts to divorce her vile husband, both unthinkable acts for a woman to perpetrate; her own daughter dies due to Maria’s failed endeavor for independence; and she befriends an even more monstrous woman, Jemima. Jemima is monstrous: her

³⁸ Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, 56.

³⁹ Hill-Miller, “*My Hideous Progeny*,” 96.

⁴⁰ Hill-Miller, “*My Hideous Progeny*,” 95.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

mother died in childbirth (her monstrous fault), father rejected her (due to her irritating existence from the moment she was born), and society rejects her because she resorts to living off of her sexuality (prostitution falling far outside the societal standards for acceptable and “moral” female behavior). The monstrous characterization of Jemima by Wollstonecraft certainly affected her daughter, Mary Shelley. Jemima is in fact like a prototype of Mary Shelley’s Monster in *Frankenstein*: a ‘monstrous’ offspring, an alien creature that cannot be accepted as a human being, made by the social institutions that force Jemima’s life to become a monstrosity; indeed, Wollstonecraft intentionally draws a line from Jemima’s hardships and sufferings directly to her motherlessness.⁴²

Wollstonecraft’s attention to motherlessness ended with a horribly ironic twist: *The Wrongs of Woman* includes Maria’s memoir to her infant daughter, and Wollstonecraft died only ten days after giving birth to her own daughter, Mary. History tells us that Mary Shelley read and reread *The Wrongs of Woman* before she wrote *Frankenstein*: a new mother herself, Mary Shelley haunted herself with her mother’s novel about motherhood.⁴³ Indeed, the text is rampant with such invocations as this one, stated from Maria’s point of view when she is thinking of her infant daughter: “Let me but give her an education—let me but prepare her body and mind to encounter the ills which await her sex...”⁴⁴ It is not a leap, then, to surmise that for Shelley, *The Wrongs of Woman* was her mother’s memoir to her.

The haunting effects of her mother’s life and work are clearly marked in Mary Shelley’s own life and work. In her own way, Shelley continued her mother’s focus on

⁴² Hill-Miller, “*My Hideous Progeny*,” 95.

⁴³ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁴ Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, 71.

gender and society; in *Frankenstein*, the monstrous outcast/wretched, motherless daughter becomes a monstrous outcast/wretched, fatherless (and motherless) son. Shelley takes gender and society, as well as many of her mother's feminist ideas, even further in *Mathilda*, a novel that describes an incestuous relationship between a father and a motherless daughter.⁴⁵ *Mathilda* even heightens Wollstonecraft's monstrous heroine theme, expanding upon Wollstonecraft's idea that motherlessness creates monstrosity; nothing is more monstrous than incest, particularly incest in which a motherless daughter's participation and sexual aggression is ambiguous. In the absence of a mother, the literary father-daughter relationship moves beyond societal norms and presents Mathilda as both pursued and pursuer; she characterizes herself both as Oedipus (guilt) and Matelda from Dante's *Purgatorio* (innocence), while her father characterizes her as Beatrice (purity).⁴⁶ The sexual ambiguities of Mathilda's narrative, insofar as the father-daughter relationship is concerned, promote a range of interpretation, as Pamela Clemit states,

This dual representation of Mathilda as both guilt-ridden and innocent, sexual transgressor and sexually pure, gains further resonance from Mary Shelley's invocation of the Christian myth of transgression in *Comus* and *Paradise Lost*, a staple source for the destabilization of mythic referents in the Godwinian novel. Though Mathilda presents herself as guilty of a mistaken desire for knowledge, she also depicts herself as blameless.⁴⁷

Shelley couches Mathilda's voice in a theatrical manner; Mathilda fancies herself a dramatic actress playing a dramatic role in both her life and the romantic fantasy she

⁴⁵ Hill-Miller, "My Hideous Progeny," 97.

⁴⁶ Pamela Clemit, "From *The Fields of Fancy* to *Matilda*: Mary Shelley's Changing Conception of Her Novella," *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 70.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

makes up for her friend, Woodville.⁴⁸ She sees herself as Adam to her father's Eve, a gender role reversal that suits her as an incest victim, casting herself as both the blameless party, yet paradoxically the more dominant one as well.⁴⁹ She is first the innocent victim to her father's aggressive tempter, a view her father eventually accepts and for which he punishes himself, but then later Mathilda reverses her own role and plays the temptress with Woodville when she urges him to commit suicide with her.⁵⁰ Shelley crafts the narrative to juxtapose two examples of temptation and fall; Mathilda successfully tempts her father by persuading him to reveal his secret, yet she is unsuccessful in her attempt to persuade Woodville to enter into a suicide pact with her.⁵¹ This symmetry helps Shelley expose the disturbed mentality of her heroine.⁵²

Again, Shelley expands here upon her mother's work. Shelley knew, through her mother's writing, that most women read only novels and nothing else, and she, like her mother, saw that limitation as an intellectual problem; Shelley illustrated the effects of this damaging phenomenon through several characters in *Mathilda*.⁵³ The first example comes when Mathilda narrates the history of her parents, before her own story even begins, and foreshadows the events of the novel through the parents' subtly crafted characterization. Charlene E. Bunnell points out,

Mary Shelley echoes her mother's warning in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* about the possible dangers of fiction when she contrasts the

⁴⁸ Charles E. Robinson, "Mathilda as Dramatic Actress," *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 78.

⁴⁹ Diane Edelman-Young, "'Kingdom of Shadows': Intimations of Desire in Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 51 (2002): 133.

⁵⁰ Clemit, "From *The Fields of Fancy* to *Matilda*," 71.

⁵¹ Clemit, "From *The Fields of Fancy* to *Mathilda*," 69.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Moskal, "'To speak in Sanchean phrase,'" 28.

reading of Mathilda's mother and father. The mother Diana 'read no novels;' however, she was well-versed in traditional Greek, Roman, and English history. Mathilda's father had discarded such texts, indulging himself instead in fiction.⁵⁴

This gender role reversal is another of Shelley's expansions of her mother's work, and is inherently illustrative of Wollstonecraft's influence on Shelley: Mathilda's mother is the rational parent, while her father is the dramatic (or perhaps melodramatic) one. The absence of both mother and father in Mathilda's youth leads Mathilda to find solace in fiction, a trait she unknowingly inherits from her father: as a lonely child growing up without the influence of her mother's rationalism or her father's affection, Mathilda "creates her own fantasies."⁵⁵ This habit of living fiction, which she has taught herself by fantasizing throughout her entire childhood, rather than living in reality becomes a habit that Mathilda cannot break, and one that ultimately leads to both her downfall and her father's.⁵⁶

Further exploring gender and socially-proscribed gender roles, Shelley conveyed the confusion and mixed messages that motherless young women receive in a patriarchal culture regarding their own sexuality. In *Mathilda*, Mary Shelley "delivers a deeply subversive message about the fundamental nature of a young girl's socialization."⁵⁷ It is a message that Wollstonecraft began in *The Wrongs of Woman* and made explicit through the character of Jemima; Shelley, on the other hand, makes the message implicit, one that is only made tangible through close readings of *Mathilda*. Parallel to and overshadowed by the incest tale in *Mathilda* is an intellectual commentary on the socialization of

⁵⁴ Charlene E. Bunnell, "Mathilda: Mary Shelley's Romantic Tragedy," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 46 (1997): 84.

⁵⁵ Shelley, *Mathilda*, 20.

⁵⁶ Robinson, "Mathilda as Dramatic Actress," 83.

⁵⁷ Hill-Miller, "My Hideous Progeny," 117.

daughters, specifically *motherless* daughters: “It is the mother’s absence that creates the conditions for the daughter’s peculiar socialization; it is the mother’s absence that reveals why the father’s emotional needs focuses on his daughter.”⁵⁸ In both Wollstonecraft’s and Shelley’s lifetimes, the victimized sexuality of a motherless daughter by her father was as socially monstrous as a woman aggressively using her sexuality to entice a male partner, which thus makes Mathilda and Jemima the perfect vehicles for illustrating their criticism of patriarchal society. Wollstonecraft expressed that motherlessness creates monstrousness in women by virtue of the disempowered victims they become; Shelley explored feminine sexuality, both as victim and as aggressor, and their equally devastating consequences. For both authors, societal institutions and societal/moral norms of feminine behavior created the monstrous outcasts that motherless daughters *must* become—they did not create themselves, but rather *were* created.

In *Mathilda*, motherlessness creates the vacuum in which men could negatively affect Mathilda; her father attempts to love her in a socially unacceptable way and later, her friend Woodville fails to understand her. These three main characters represent Shelley’s viewpoint of womanhood as a victimized and misunderstood existence in a patriarchal culture. Mathilda presents herself as “alone—quite alone—in the world” and haunted by secrets that “had better die with me.”⁵⁹ She is a victim, having learned “that misery could arise from love, and this lesson that all at last must learn was taught me in a manner few are obliged to receive it.”⁶⁰ Mathilda’s father does nothing to help her overcome what he has put her through, both as a virtually orphaned child and a confused

⁵⁸ Hill-Miller, “*My Hideous Progeny*,” 120.

⁵⁹ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2008), 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

young adult. He selfishly justifies his incestuous relationship with her by claiming he perceived some form of spiritual transference of her mother into her, and he often claims to desire her forgiveness in the same breath that he admits how much he has hurt her.⁶¹

His selfishness culminates in his suicide, leaving Mathilda alone to process her victimization and the participating role she played; her love for her father was seemingly natural at first, but he twisted it into an incestuous relationship from which she could not escape (or so she writes). Not surprisingly, her love for him became a jealous and possessive enterprise, and she later transfers those emotional turmoils onto Woodville, treating him in much the same ways her father treated her. Through Mathilda's unhealthy dependence upon both her father's and Woodville's attentions, Shelley clearly expresses Mathilda's "need" for a man in her life, no matter how destructive or negative the relationship(s) might be, which is even today a typical societal expectation for women.

Given the destructive relationship into which Mathilda's father forced her, it is no wonder Mathilda processes her experiences through "strange and fanciful combinations with outward circumstances."⁶² This self-deluding technique yields both a flawed and unreliable narrator and a persona that uses tricks of the mind to survive unimaginable devastation and loss. Mathilda had lost her innocence through the devastation of incest; Shelley wrote *Mathilda* during the devastating period following the deaths of her two young children, Clara, in September 1818, and William, in June 1819.⁶³ She used her own melancholy and grief to create the misleading "musing" of a victimized character

⁶¹ Shelley, *Mathilda*, 64, 68, 70.

⁶² Robinson, "Mathilda as Dramatic Actress," 86.

⁶³ Clemit, "From *The Fields of Fancy* to *Matilda*," 65.

that needs to create a new persona.⁶⁴ Like many victims of sexual abuse, Shelley's Mathilda is trying to make sense of her victimization, and she recasts herself in a role with more control and power, as the sexual aggressor—as *victimizer* rather than *victimized*, a feat Shelley achieves through crafty allusions to other incest texts.⁶⁵ By writing Mathilda as a “substantially flawed character” who “performs victimization in order to obtain certain liberties,” Shelley offers a critique of both her heroine and the society that produces her through the context of a novel, just as Wollstonecraft attempted to do in *The Wrongs of Woman*, “indicting an oppressive social system that provides women with no other option.”⁶⁶ For both Shelley and Wollstonecraft, societal power was reserved for men; they both tried, through their writing, to find a measure of independence and control that would further the cause of feminism. Shelley's writing style reflects a romanticized feminism, while her mother's writing style was much more revolutionary.⁶⁷

In *Mathilda*, Shelley both echoes and builds upon her mother's revolutionary feminist philosophy. Wollstonecraft's Maria and Jemima were two disempowered motherless women, neither of whom had any choice in their victimizations. The rejection of familial and social norms by the unguided motherless Mathilda allows her character to have “freely chosen” the disempowered feminine role she ends up playing.⁶⁸ Indeed, Wollstonecraft places “the mother as the controlling power at the family's moral center, but simultaneously depict the way society disempowers the mother in all other respects,”

⁶⁴ Robinson, “Mathilda as Dramatic Actress,” 87.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁶ Melina Moore, “Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* and the Struggle for Female Narrative Subjectivity,” *Rocky Mountain Review*, 65, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 209.

⁶⁷ Kelly, “Politicizing the Personal,” 159.

⁶⁸ Moskal, ““To speak in Sanchean phrase,”” 29.

a trend she expounded upon often in her works.⁶⁹ Alternatively, Shelley's *Mathilda* is melodramatic and self-indulgent, and her narrative presents like a theatrical tragedy with *Mathilda* playing the leading "victim" role.⁷⁰ Was this depiction a conscious choice by Shelley, to present *Mathilda*'s character in a woman who seems unable to distinguish fantasy from reality?⁷¹ Melina Moore offers an answer:

Mary Shelley once wrote in her journals, "If I have never written to vindicate the rights of women, I have ever befriended women when—oppressed—at every risk I have defended & supported victims to the social system—But I do not make a boast." This comment seems to encapsulate Shelley's work in *Mathilda*; she does not "make a boast" outright, but she does provide her reader with a disturbing glimpse into the mind of a young woman whose desire to "give words to her dark tale" drives her to script her own subject position as victim, a woman who will go to any length to ensure that the tale will be "dark" enough to give her license to tell it. She reveals her intense empathy for oppressed women by creating a heroine who commits terrifying acts of artifice and manipulation in order to indict the social system that produced her: a system where victimization and death seem to provide *Mathilda* with the only real opportunity for female narrative autonomy.⁷²

In *Mathilda*, Shelley actually perfected her mother's victimized disempowered female and took the character a step further; Shelley allowed her "heroine" to be a *conscious* victim to her father's incest, perhaps even a subconscious instigator. It is hard not to speculate that Shelley's own emotional rollercoaster with her father, both as a young motherless girl and as a fairly successful author, possibly meant that *Mathilda* was at least in part written as a cathartic exercise, as Mitzi Myers states:

The novella... illuminates not only Mary Shelley's fiction but also the mythologies of Western culture. When we see more clearly what Mary Shelley is up to in loving, hating, and symbolically murdering her father,

⁶⁹ Hill-Miller, "*My Hideous Progeny*," 203.

⁷⁰ Bunnell, "Mary Shelley's Romantic Tragedy," 75.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷² Moore, "The Struggle for Female Narrative Subjectivity," 214.

we are also understanding what it means to be daughters within a broader context.⁷³

The broader context in terms of Shelley's and Wollstonecraft's lifetimes was one where societal norms and institutions created an understanding that women exist under the protection of and as inferior to men.⁷⁴ Echoing her mother's views on where women exist in a patriarchal culture, Shelley's Mathilda is victimized and disempowered, a motherless female character, one who gives in to the most selfish of desires. Although some might argue that Mathilda empowers herself by rejecting female behavioral norms and conventions dictated by society, Shelley's message seems much more ominous: Mathilda's delusion of empowerment, created by flouting conventional behavior and by participating in an incestuous relationship with her father, *only* results in her actually being nothing more than yet another victimized monster. Mathilda is just another victim of the whims of men, a disempowered female. This same disempowered female, who willingly perpetuates the bondage and societal limitation placed upon women, was anathema to Wollstonecraft, and it was that very role Wollstonecraft's writings were meant to change. Shelley used Wollstonecraft's despised stereotypical woman to further their joint message. One cannot help but see this poignant link of Shelley's writing to Wollstonecraft's writing; it is as though Shelley brought Wollstonecraft's feminist perspective full circle. Where Wollstonecraft's feminist message is an in-your-face clarion call to arms, Shelley's feminist message is a sad siren warning, a warning to all women of the dire consequences of freely choosing to participate in the *status quo*.

⁷³ Mitzi Myers, "Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: The Female Author between Public and Private Spheres," *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 168.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-70.

Shelley echoes another of her mother's literary techniques when she created Mathilda as a character with autobiographical qualities: both author and character spent time in Scotland; both author and character had father issues; both author and character idealized their deceased mothers, and both author and character had issues related to motherlessness.⁷⁵ It might be difficult for the modern person to understand the lens through which Shelley perceived her mother because Wollstonecraft is today respected and revered: on the one hand, Shelley idolized her, but on the other hand, she had to deal with the fact that her mother was a social outcast, reviled and disparaged.⁷⁶ Shelley was, in fact, her mother's victim—not the other way around, “momma's unknowing murderess,” as she might have thought when she was an adolescent.⁷⁷ Like Mathilda, Shelley felt shame and guilt and love and longing in relation to her infamous absent mother. These emotions are also the emotions of incest victims, who blame themselves for the failings and the actions of their abusers.⁷⁸ In Shelley's case, her victimization did not extend to a sexually incestuous relationship with her father (though some critics choose to read *Mathilda* in this way), but it is clear that she understood a fundamental truth for daughters with absent mothers: fathers end up socializing their motherless daughters by treating them like “little wives.”⁷⁹ This understanding creates another parallel to her mother's work, in that Shelley offers *Mathilda* as a subversive text, one meant to expose an inherent ugliness that takes place when a motherless daughter is

⁷⁵ Hill-Miller, “*My Hideous Progeny*,” 106.

⁷⁶ Barbara O'Sullivan, “Beatrice in *Valperga*: A New Cassandra,” *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 145.

⁷⁷ Myers, “The Female Author between Personal and Private Spheres,” 163.

⁷⁸ Hill-Miller, “*My Hideous Progeny*,” 103.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

expected, by social convention in a patriarchal culture, to exist solely to care-take and satisfy the emotional and physical needs of a father (and any younger siblings).⁸⁰

Certainly, Shelley's motherless Mathilda is as much a victim of society as was Wollstonecraft's motherless Maria and Jemima.

The notion of motherlessness equating with victimized monstrosity clearly made a lasting impression on both Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter, Mary Shelley. The younger Mary was rarely vocal about the loss of her mother, perhaps because during Shelley's lifetime, Wollstonecraft was still considered "a reviled heretic," yet Shelley still had the opportunity to learn about her mother and her mother's intense feminist philosophy by reading her work.⁸¹ Thus, Shelley came to know her mother, and she came to embrace her mother's feminist philosophy and desire to change women's lot in life. While Shelley's feminism is distinctive from her mother's—partially for the reason that Shelley refused to criticize culture through discourse, because she felt "uncomfortable with her 'argumentative powers'"—she, like her mother, "consistently portrays and criticizes male domination, the sexual education of daughters, and the monstrous effects of the social disenfranchisement of a single sex."⁸² It is difficult to imagine how Shelley perceived her mother through the rather murky lens she was given: knowing her mother only through her mother's writings and through her father Godwin's idealized vision of Wollstonecraft as one for whom there was no equal in the world.

As Mary Shelley matured and transitioned into womanhood—without the guidance of a mother, a theme so prominent in her mother's writings—perhaps she felt

⁸⁰ Hill-Miller, "My Hideous Progeny," 122.

⁸¹ O'Sullivan, "Beatrice in *Valperga*," 145.

⁸² Hill-Miller, "My Hideous Progeny," 203.

the loss of her mother more intensely. It is not hard to imagine how much the older Shelley would have longed for her mother: as Godwin increasingly demanded her attention, as she ran away with Percy Bysshe Shelley and experienced her own sexuality, as she suffered the deaths of her children, and as she struggled to write, to be a wife and mother, to find her own literary place in the world. Readers of Shelley's novels can infer that the absence of Wollstonecraft from her life affected her deeply, not just because Wollstonecraft was deceased, but also because Wollstonecraft was such an unique and intelligent woman, one whose ideas were far ahead of her time. Did Mary Shelley ever feel crushed by the weight of her mother's reputation, or "monstrous" because she lacked "a mother's affection," as Wollstonecraft's Jemima did?⁸³ Did Shelley feel the weight of a cruel destiny when she herself lost three children? Did she think of them as she read and reread the narration of Maria's daughter's death in *The Wrongs of Woman*?⁸⁴ When she wrote *Mathilda*, Shelley was pregnant with her last child, she (prophetically) feared her husband's eventual death, and she felt constantly drained by and unable to escape from her father's incessant financial and emotional needs; she must have examined womanhood within the context of a patriarchal system, where women are dependent, disempowered, sexually enslaved, abused, used up, and suffer endlessly, with no escape but death.⁸⁵ Shelley's personal sufferings must have seemed overwhelming by then; she a haunted woman, and death itself weighed heavily on her mind.

That *Mathilda* is written from a deathbed perspective is likely no accident: haunted by a deceased mother and by her own deceased children, Shelley feared death,

⁸³ Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, 56.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁵ Hill-Miller, "My Hideous Progeny," 126.

feared further loss, and yet believed death was the only escape and salvation, particularly for the monstrous characters she and her mother had created.⁸⁶ Death was also the only way to reunite with loved ones who had passed on; through death, Mathilda would be reunited with a mother never had the chance to know, and a father whose love on Earth was sinful, but in Heaven would be “pure.”⁸⁷ In writing of Mathilda’s death within the perspective of an other-worldly, heavenly reunion, Mary Shelley could at last in some metaphorical way reunite with her deceased children and her own mother, a mother that she, like Mathilda, never knew. In death, and all could be together: Wollstonecraft the mother and Shelley the daughter, and Shelley the mother and her own children. Perhaps Shelley believed that death, which allowed their characters escape from their monstrousness, could at last clear the lens through which she saw her mother. The mother-child bond that Shelley never physically had with Wollstonecraft left a gaping hole, but Shelley filled it as best she could with what her mother left behind: her ideas. Sadly, however, both Wollstonecraft and Shelley failed to achieve the feminist goals they set for themselves in their novels during their lifetimes: *The Wrongs of Woman* was unfinished at the time of Wollstonecraft’s death, and *Mathilda* was not published until 1959, thanks to William Godwin’s stubborn refusal to publish it after Shelley sent the manuscript to him to help keep her father financially afloat.⁸⁸ Modern investigators into the lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley will never know for certain the depth and power of the bonds mother and daughter shared as women and as authors—this mother and daughter who never even knew each other. Still, the common features and

⁸⁶ Hill-Miller, “*My Hideous Progeny*,” 125.

⁸⁷ Shelley, *Mathilda*, 130-1.

⁸⁸ Robinson, “*Mathilda as Dramatic Actress*,” 76.

themes between Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* and Shelley's *Mathilda* are undeniable, and offer some insight, even if it is indirect, into their remarkable relationship.

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